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ABSTRACT

Since its origin in the nineteenth century, the growth of the field of public relations has led to the formation of several professional organizations aimed at advancing the condition of the profession. The profession is now prominent in government, corporations, and private firms, with many organizations employing executives whose sole function is public relations. Public relations differs from advertising in that it is not directed at the purchase of products or services; rather, it addresses a variety of audiences with the aim of maximizing the efficiency of the organization. A model for analyzing public relations activities should include the following elements: decoding, assigning meaning, encoding, and receiving the message. An advantage of such a model is that it shows that communications is a dynamic rather than a static process. (EMH)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA:

AN OVERVIEW

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As a separate and distinct field of endeavor, public relations can trace its origins back as early as 1883, when the American Bell Telephone Company began to investigate the relationships between its local companies and the general public. Also contributing to the establishment of the field during this early developmental period were the successes enjoyed by the national war propaganda agency begun during the First World War, the U.S. Committee on Public Information, and the various government sponsored information programs that immediately preceded and continued throughout the Second World War.

Thanks to the efforts of a number of dedicated and talented individuals attracted to this new and challenging field since that time, various professional societies and national organizations have come into being to, "exchange ideas, study ways of better performing their own services and advancing the condition of the profession--through a body of literature, ethics, and self-government (Stephenson, 1971, p. 5)."

Formed in 1948, the most notable of these to date has been the Public Relations Society of America, which has attempted to set high standards for the profession by accrediting its members through a series of intensive written and oral examinations closely monitored and administrated under the auspices of the society.

Over the past sixty years, at least three important phases in the development of the public relations field have become discernable. Beginning first with the above mentioned efforts to promote governmental programs and war propaganda, the field soon went through a second phase in which its principal activities

centered more on the aims and objectives of corporate managers and their more profit-oriented operations. Individuals entering the profession during this period were oftentimes connected in some way or another with the mass media, particularly journalism, and were thus familiar with the capabilities as well as the limitations of some of the more conventional forms of mediated communications.

Another, more recent, phase in the evolutionary development of the field has been the rise of public relations specialists representing private consulting firms which are independent of any one company or field. Individuals employed in such organizations have tended to concentrate on the process of public relations as it applies to a number of different clients and situations.

Some companies, attempting to combine corporate knowledge and familiarity of products and services along with some degree of detachment and objectivity, have opted for the creation of administrative positions employing a number of full time staff members who work in conjunction with management and outside consulting firms in what might be considered a team approach to public relations.

Even a brief look at handbooks or bibliographies related to public relations during these phases would have revealed the growing acceptance and respect that the field has earned from a large number of businesses and professions. In the private enterprise sphere, for example, public relations has become of central importance in fields such as marketing, retailing, and banking,

while those more closely associated with public affairs, such as local and state government, the military, public and private schools, higher education, and religious and philanthropic organizations have become more and more committed to including such activities in their day to day operations.

Underscoring the growing acceptance of public relations is the fact that since 1950 the field has experienced a more phenomenal growth rate than any other single management function (Burton, 1973). The extent of this growth is reflected in the ever-increasing numbers of people entering the public relations field and the major financial commitments being made by many of the leading companies and organizations concerned with increasing productivity and improving their public image.

One prominent public relations manager has noted the tremendous impact that such public relations efforts have had on the business community over the past thirty-five years, thus:

> Prior to World War II, relatively few people were involved in professional public relations. Today there are an estimated 100,000. Authoritative estimates place the amount spent on public relations at $2 billion annually. Most major business firms have some type of organized PR program or department. New departments are being established at the rate of approximately 100 each year. Existing departments are constantly being expanded and revamped as techniques improve and PR personnel become more qualified. Public relations agencies are also experiencing a rapid growth. There are about 1,400 such agencies today, ranging from one-man shops to large organizations with world-wide operations employing several hundred persons (Burton, 1973, p. 327).

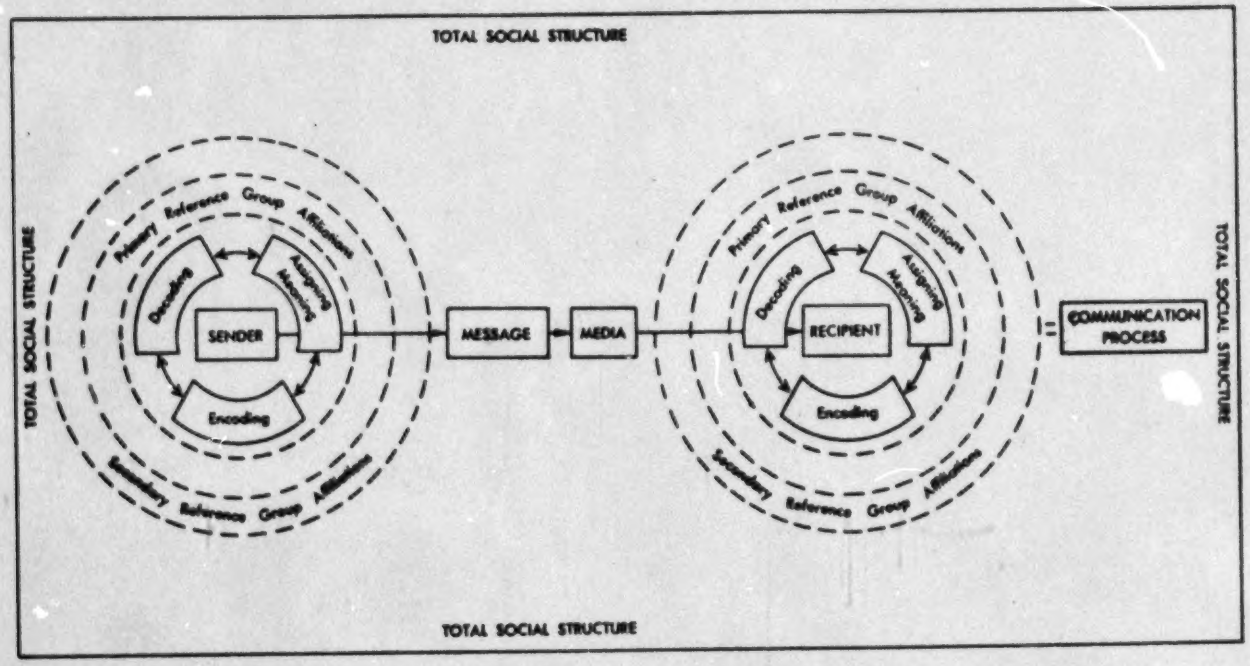
Because of such success, almost everyone has heard of public relations today, but few understand the true role of public relations in business and industrial settings due to a number of

popular misconceptions about the field. For example, although it can be used to further such activities, the term public relations should not be used synonomously with other management designations such as advertising or sales promotion. For while public relations advertising, sales promotion, and other marketing functions are oftentimes allied in their overall objectives, their approaches and techniques for reaching them are usually quite different and distinct.

Public relations also differs considerably from advertising efforts in that it usually is not directly concerned with the actual purchasing of space or time from the various media to sell the company's products or services. The substantive information contained in any given advertising release, however, might have been solicited, gathered, and synthesized by a public relations staff wishing to evoke specific types of responses from a number of different audiences.

For example, several audiences of great importance to a public relations staff in a typical corporate organization are: (1) the employees, (2) the community, (3) potential customers and the mass media, (4) representatives from the state and federal government, and (5) the company's shareholders. All of these must be taken into consideration and communicated with effectively in order for the organization to function at maximum efficiency.

Recognizing the importance of understanding all aspects of the communication process in such efforts, Robinson (1966) has proposed a general model of the total communication process in public relations based upon earlier models by Schramm (1961), Gerbner (1956), and Riley and Riley (1959), the main features of which can be seen on the following page.



A COMMUNICATION MODEL*

*Taken from Robinson, Edward J. Communication and Public Relations. Columbus Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1966, p. 122.

The first major component in such a model is the sender stage which Robinson (1966, p. 77) has described as, "a device for symbolizing any source of a communication." Interpreted in this light, an individual person or an "institutionalized" individual representing an organization can be considered senders.

Included as a part of this first stage of communication are three important and complex processes that have been identified by Robinson (1966, p. 77) as decoding (receiving and collecting information), assigning meaning (making sense out of the information), and encoding (developing and executing a communications program consistent with the gathered and interpreted information).

The three functions of decoding, assigning meaning, and encoding is seen as a circular process that includes both intentional and unintentional feedback both of which can vary considerably in scope and type, depending on the particular communication situation.

The next major component in the total model communication has been labelled the message stage. "Messages can be constructed out of any conceivable set of symbols that a sender wishes to use. The only limitation on symbol usage is that they make for common meaning between the sender and recipient of the message (Robinson, 1966, p. 82)." Although this might appear to be a very basic and fundamental point, great difficulty can arise in public relations work because of the wide variety of symbols available to the

sender and the limited abilities and experiences of the recipient.

After deciding on the message he intends to communicate, the sender must next determine what the means of transmission will be. The third major link in the total communication process, the media stage, is concerned not only with the various types of media available, but also when and how such media can be used most effectively. "The media stage is designed to include any and all means by which messages are transmitted and represents the physical link between the one sending a message and the recipient of that message (Robinson, 1966, p. 83)." Some of the more traditional means that have proven successful for public relations practitioners in this regard have been the various forms of the printed word, the electronic media, such as radio and television and audiovisual presentations, such as slides, filmstrips and films, to name just a few.

The fourth, and last, stage in the total communication process is the recipient stage which in many ways serves to give purpose to the other three. As in the case of the sender stage, "the recipient stage can stand for such things as a single individual or the members of a group, a company, or a government. Any object of a communication capable of some degree of decoding and assigning meaning can be thought of as a recipient (Robinson, 1966, p. 87)."

In an attempt to point out the similarities and differences between the recipient stage and the sender stage, Robinson (1966, p. 87) has noted:

> Perhaps the most noticeable addition is the circular process of decoding, assigning meaning, and encoding attached to the recipient stage exactly as was done for the sender stage. This means that the recipient goes through the same processes as the sender in order to understand the messages sent to him. This generally means that the recipient must speak the same language as the sender. More particularly, the recipient must know any specialized vocabulary or slang expressions, if they are pertinent (Robinson, 1966, p. 87).

One of the advantages of using such a model to explain the communication process is that it reveals that communication is a dynamic rather than a static process. Also, "it encourages the use of the model as a whole, recognizing that communication is made up of many, many parts, all of which must be operating at least minimum efficiency for any communication at all to take place (Robinson, 1966, p. 88)."

Such observations take on additional significance and meaning when one takes a closer look at the way media has been used by those in public relations. For example, all too often decisions related to the choice of media to be used for public relations purposes is determined by factors other than those directly related to the past experiences and present needs of the recipient. Although various reasons can be given for such circumstances, it would appear that some of the more important of these are attributable to the tendency for public relations people to place excessive reliance on the volume and frequency of the messages transmitted to help solve public relations problems and the fact that it has been the most familiar and visible activity done by those involved in the public relations process.

In attempting to analyze such tendencies, Robinson (1966, p. 86) has noted:

> Two main reasons were suggested for this undue emphasis on the media stage by public relations practitioners. One was the fact that a great many present-day public relations practitioners were formerly associated with the mass media as newspapermen, editors, free-lance writers, or magazine writers. Experiences gained in these previous occupations make them very familiar with the means of transmission, generally much more so than with the other stages of the communication process. Another reason suggested was that the public relations practitioner's effectiveness (either for his company or for a client) is very often measured in terms of exposure through the media, particularly the mass media. Far too often, the worth of the public relations practitioner is measured in terms of the column inch in newspapers, minutes of radio and television broadcast time, and the number of feature articles placed in magazines.

Also contributing to the use or misuse of media in public relations is the fact that much of the literature[1] on the subject tends to only inform the reader about the more technical aspects of media rather than how it can be utilized more effectively in the field.

While it is recognized that such knowledge and familiarity is prerequisite to the more effective use of media, it would appear that each of the various methods currently employed by those in public relations such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, company literature, external publications and audiovisual presentations are studied and practiced almost as separate entities without any unifying approach or theory upon which to judge their appropriateness or effectiveness.

The next phase in the evolutionary development of the public relations field could well see the role of public relations personnel

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[1]See, for example, Section V, pp. 329-485, "The Techniques of Communication" in Lesly, P. (ed.). Lesly's Public Relations Handbook, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971, and Section IV, pp. 591-823, "Communication Methods" in Stephenson, H. (ed.). Handbook of Public Relations, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.

change from a managerial one primarily responsible for beaming unidirectional messages out to intended audiences to that of a professional communicator and top level executive responsible and familiar with all aspects of communication, administration, and the media.

If such roles and responsibilities are ever to be fully realized, it will most likely result from an increased awareness and appreciation of the potential and limitations of the media and the dynamics of the communication processes by those professionals willing to set new horizons for themselves and the field of public relations.

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